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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [DOMESTIC](#) [POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: GPC CONVENTION: POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE, SIGNIFYING NOTHING?

Classified By: CDA NABEEL KHOURY FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

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summary:  
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11. (C) To fluttering banners, flying doves, sound effects reminiscent of Space Odyssey 2000 (with added neighing horses to symbolize the GPC mascot), President Saleh marched into the Aden football stadium on December 15 to officially launch the proceedings of the ruling party's seventh annual congress. The ceremony included some twenty foreign political party delegations, most of whom were given the floor, along with opposition and pseudo opposition speakers. Between Saleh's opening remarks and the words of speakers representing such parties as the Syrian Ba'ath as well as the Chinese and Cuban communists, the chorus refrain quickly developed a link between Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese and even Sudanese causes - all said to be suffering from American/Zionist conspiracies. A lone liberal (Kuwaiti) voice reminded the 5000 strong GPC audience that their real enemy was within and that its name was corruption. Decisions, in the end, lagged far behind the pomp and circumstance. Dr. Iryani retires (but retains a token position), PM Bajammal takes his seat as Secretary General of the party (but, so far, retains the PM job) and Saleh accepts reelection as overall president of the GPC. Any cabinet changes or reform election platforms will have to wait, perhaps until the dust settles and all the President's horses return to their corral by the end of the week. End summary.

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Background:  
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12. (C) The ruling General People's Congress (GPC) opened proceedings of the party's seventh annual convention, December 15, in the southern port city of Aden. The choice of Aden was reportedly a deliberate gesture to the importance of the south, and therefore of the union, after repeated signals this year of a growing resentment among southerners due to a feeling of being relegated to second class citizenship in a lop-sided union that has favored the north for jobs, economic benefits and political influence. The convention was also held against a background of growing disenchantment among donor countries and international organizations with Yemen's poor performance and dropping international rankings in the critical areas of political and economic indicators. The ROYG has received particularly poor marks in fighting corruption and protecting freedom of speech. Days before the convention, the Joint Meeting of Parties (JMP), an opposition party coalition, preempted Saleh by announcing their joint platform for the upcoming elections in the summer of 2006. The convention, therefore, took on added importance as an opportunity for Saleh to accept the nomination of the GPC for a third term as President, but behind his own platform for bold new reforms and perhaps with the announcement of a new cabinet to help him put the corrupt past behind. (Comment: Upon his return from Washington, Saleh told us that we would soon see some serious new initiatives and decisions, as well as a new cabinet. Some of Saleh's ministers also led us to believe that the GPC convention might be the occasion for the announcement of new reforms. End comment).

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Saleh's speech, a non-event:  
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13. (C) Saleh's speech, declaring the opening of the convention, was a mere ten-minute affair. He declared that Yemen was in the fight against terrorism and corruption and intent on overcoming poverty. He said that he held his hand out to the opposition and their right to contest all elections against his party. On international issues, Saleh said that he deplored the conditions under which Palestinians and Iraqis were living and called on the international community to pressure Israel to stop oppressing the Palestinians and to affect a quick ending to the occupation of Iraq. (comment: This, after he had told us repeatedly, including during a recent visit by General Abizaid, that he was not calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq but merely for regrouping them in bases outside the main

cities. End comment)!

14. (C) Saleh's only other contribution, during the four hour event, was to jump up and take notes as a representative of the Arab Political Parties Union (reportedly a former Abu Nidhal colleague) suggested that the ROYG should rename a Adani street after Ahmed Shogeiri (Arafats predecessor as head of the PLO and author of the infamous throw-the-Jews-in-the-sea statement). Shogeiri, according to the speaker, stopped in Aden once during the early sixties and praised the city and the Yemeni people as genuine heroes of the Arab world. the only other words said by Saleh at the end of the convention were to thank the foreign delegates and express support for the suggestions made, in particular the one on naming a Adeni street after Shuqairi, and perhaps one after Arafat as well!!

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Death by speeches:  
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15. (C) By far, the bulk of the time at the opening was consumed by foreign delegations - though in the end, not all were invited to speak. The chain of speakers ranged from those with a message, like the Egyptian and Syrian delegates, to those who were just happy to be there, like the Cuban and Chinese delegates. The representative for the opposition JMP was invited to speak first, which was described by GPC loyalists as a grand gesture by the President towards his opponents. The speech was long but dignified and detailed economic and political defects in Yemen that needed to be corrected. In a critique of the government's piecemeal approach to reform, the speaker said, "It does not make sense to adopt some reforms and reject others. The country needs a comprehensive plan on all fronts and a commitment at the highest levels to all reforms, otherwise the country will miss the chance for averting the crisis and moving down the path of true development." To balance the magnanimity of that gesture, the next speaker represented a GPC clone, going by the misnomer of "The Opposition Council." Far from opposing, that speech was adulatory of Saleh and a scathing attack on the JMP and their program, described as pandering to the unpatriotic opposition outside Yemen.

16. (C) Third on the list of speakers, and the first of the foreign delegates to speak, the delegate from the Syrian Ba'ath Party stole the show with a bombastic speech on the role of Damascus throughout history as the "bastion of nationalism and resistance" and vowed that no amount of American or Zionist pressure would get the Syrian people to change their principled stance on regional and international issues. The speaker went into great detail on how resolution 1663 was an ominous precedent of foreign intervention in the Levant and that, despite Syria's efforts to comply, the attacks against it continued. The speaker also attacked "certain Lebanese factions" for allowing themselves to be used against Syria. "The Arab nation needs to stand hand in hand with Syria," said the speaker, "to defeat these foreign plots against our nation." The speaker put the "plots against Syria and Lebanon" full square in the same bloc with plots against the Palestinians, Iraqis and Sudanese!

17. (U) The Egyptian delegate, seemingly more reasoned than his Syrian colleague, did not mention any American Zionist plots, but left no doubt in his praise for Yemen, that it was Yemen's independent approach to democratic reform that he admired. "Egypt," said the speaker, "will never allow outsiders to dictate our path for us. Democracy cannot be exported. Just like in Yemen, it will be our own internal dialogue that will guide our democratic path."

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Liberal Voices?  
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18. (U) At the end of a chain of speakers, denouncing outside interference in the affairs of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Syrians, Lebanese and Sudanese, a Kuwaiti writer/journalist took the stage and made the only short, to the point and honest statement of the evening. Ahmed al-Rab'ie, one of the few liberal and vocal voices in the Arab world, reminded the audience that party loyalty is not the goal, but the means to serve the nation. "When a party becomes a tribe and deals with other parties as tribal enemies, nothing is left for the service of the country," said al-Rab'ie. "I warn you also, my friends," continued a-Rab'ie, "that it is when we as Arabs forget to face the enemy within that we lose the war, the peace and the struggle for development. The enemy I'm talking about is corruption."

19. (U) The evening wouldn't have been complete without poetry. In the long-standing Arab tradition of "al-Madeeh" (poetry of praise), the GPC brought out a Yemeni poet who extolled the virtues of the great leader (Saleh, of course) loudly and rhythmically. The poet however did have some advice and a warning to the President. He recommended

fairness in treating the Yemeni people, equality for women and warned that if Saleh didn't rescind his decision not to run for a third term, "the Yemeni people would rise and fill the universe with their cries of anger!!" As for corruption, the poet added, "deal with it by all means, but if you want to wipe it out completely, perhaps you will have to wait until you completely replace the Yemeni people with another."

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Comment:

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10. (C) The whole tone of the convention was a disappointment. Where we expected substance, we saw only ceremony; where we hoped for even-handedness, we saw tokenism and taking away with one hand what the other had just given. Saleh, instead of inspiring a new sense of pragmatism and demonstrating a real will to reform, chose to take the easy way out with hackneyed clichés. His insisting on PM Bajammal as Secretary General of the GPC, despite resistance from his own party loyalists, did not bode well for a departure from the past, something the donor community had been hoping for. His pandering to Arab nationalist sentiment on foreign policy issues and providing a platform to the Syrian Ba'ath delegate (when he had been touting to us for weeks his support for our message with Bashar al-Assad) struck us as the height of insincerity. End comment.

Khoury